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ABSTRACT

Demographic changes and economic need have driven higher education institutions to become more flexible in educational programming and to forge bonds with business and industry. Technological advancements such as satellite communications and computers have helped facilitate these partnerships between education and the business community. In many cases, the academic support services (such as career services) for these programs are nonexistent or severely understaffed. This may happen for a variety of reasons. For instance, a company may want to provide educational opportunities to its employees, but views support services as "fluff" (since the company has neither the physical space to set aside, nor the time to let employees participate); or the educational institution may not want to commit staff (and financial resources) to a program that is not yet stable. There may be a presumption on the part of program planners that adults who decide to participate in the educational activity will know when and where to seek out academic support services by themselves, although recent research on adults and self-directedness would contradict this belief. This dilemma can be prevented if academic and support service portions of the program are developed together in order to help the program succeed from both the organization's perspective and the learners' perspective. (Contains 11 references.) (KC)

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PROVISION OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES TO ADULTS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

David A. Manzo

ABSTRACT

In a rapidly changing economic world lifelong education and the concomitant need for academic support services, such as career counseling becomes a continuous process. Corporations (the fastest growing sector of adult education) have recognized the need to provide educational opportunities (beyond job-specific training and education) to their employees. Higher education institutions (because of demographic changes and economic need) have become more flexible in educational programming, and have reached out to forge bonds with business and industry. Technological advancements (e.g., satellite communications, computers, etc.) have helped facilitate these partnerships between education and the business community.

In many cases the academic support services (e.g., career services) for these programs are non-existent or severely under-staffed. This may happen for a variety of reasons. For instance, a company may want to provide educational opportunities to its employees, but views support services as "fluff" (having neither the physical space to set aside, or the time to let employees participate); or the educational institution may not want to commit staff (and the financial resources) to a program that is not yet stable. Or, there may be a presumption on the part of program planners that adults, who decide to participate in the educational activity, will know when and where to seek out academic support services by themselves. Even though recent research on adults and self-directedness would contradict this belief.

The issue presented in this article is how professionals involved with academic support services should respond when they are asked for input on these technology driven non-traditional programs. It is suggested here that academic and support service portions of the program be developed in tandem in order to help the program succeed, from the organizations' perspective and from the learner's perspective.

OUTLINE

I. Adult Learners
   A. Who are they?
   B. Why do they Participate
II. Business and Industry
   A. Why provide educational opportunities
   B. Benefits derived
III. Educational Institutions and Growth of Non-traditional Programming
IV. Technology
V. Support Services via Technology
VI. Conclusions

ADULT PARTICIPATION AND SUPPORT SERVICES

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Adult participation in post-secondary, credit-related, education programs has grown rapidly over the last decade. Today, adults enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs represent more than half of all college enrollments (Manzo and Ross-Gordon, 1995). The rate of growth of these enrollments is likely to continue, due as much to demographic changes as economic influences. As demographic changes occur and America gets older, education program planners will have to search out new markets. Business and industry is a willing host for new education programs. Technological advances, in telecommunications and computers, make the partnership between educational institutions and business and industry even more viable.

Adults participate in educational activities for any number of reasons such as career change, maintenance of skills, or personal gratification. Adults, however, rarely learn for the sake of learning. Adults participate in learning activities in order to cope with some sort of change in their lives (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980). Technology is merely a means that makes participating in educational activities more convenient for the adult learner.

The use of technology, as a means of providing educational programming, also has implications for academic support services like counseling, and career services. Adults may see an immediate need for a piece of knowledge. Academic support service professionals can help adults see how that piece of knowledge fits into long-range plans and goals. I do not believe the presumption that all adults are mature enough to know when to participate in learning activities, and the corollary that all adults are mature enough to know when, where, and how to seek out academic support services. My belief is supported by recent research that indicates that all adults are not self-directed learners. Additionally, self-directedness is not an all or nothing proposition; there are gradations of self-directedness (Kerka, 1995).

The same academic support services that are required for on-campus programs are needed for these non-traditional education programs, that use technology as the primary mode of presentation. The adult, who decides to participate in such an education program, will require access to academic support services. These distance education programs will also require well trained staff (both in the technology and in the program goals). Garrison argues that distance education requires some facilitation in order to bridge the "formal" setting (i.e., technology) and the "informal" learning setting (Kerka, 1995). It is my belief that as more education programs are developed in partnership with business and industry, and use technology as a means of program delivery, it will be the quality of academic support services that will separate the failed programs from the successful programs.

This article presents some issues concerned with the question of what could be done to increase the likelihood of a successful program.

Business and Industry

The partnership between business and industry and post-secondary education is the fastest growing portion of adult higher education (Watkins, 1992). Education services provided by external education organizations to business and industry is up almost six percent

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since 1986, while there has been a 12% decline in internal training. Educational packages developed externally, but delivered by internal staff is down over one percent. Companies have set aside 2.5% of their training budget for services provided by community colleges, .89% from technical institutes, and 10.12% from universities (Watkins, 1992).

Benefits are derived by both parties in this collaborative arrangement. The education institution can tap into a new market of learners. Additionally, once the program is established with the technology in place, physical space provided and courses and instructors identified, the overhead to maintain the program is minimal. It is possible to see costs decline after the initial semester. Companies also reap benefits. Such as reduced education and training costs. For example, if education is part of the employee benefit package, the company can bargain with the education institution for reduced tuition and fees (perhaps, getting flat rates regardless of the number of participating students). There are also non-monetary benefits to be derived. Its possible for worker productivity to be increased by providing learning activities at the worksite. Workers will not have to leave the worksite for educational purposes. It can also reduce the stress of work, and bring staff and management closer together (Katz and Kahn, 1980).

Program Design and Distance Education

Three concepts coalesced that increased the likelihood of collaboration between post-secondary education and business and industry, and the use of non-traditional modes of education programming. First, the general change in the demographics of America (the numbers of traditional age post-secondary education students declined, while the number of adult students increased). Second, economic and social changes in the workplace. Such as more part time and temporary workers, career changes, more women in the workplace. Finally, technological advances made it possible in terms of time, space, and finances to provide education off-campus.

In the past distance education meant that the student in one location communicated with a teacher in another location, on a sporadic basis by mail, maybe by phone, and hardly ever in real time. In the new era of distance education (or maybe "education at a distance" is just as appropriate) these old concepts are exploded. Advances in telecommunication and computer technology have made education readily available to all adults. For the sake of clarity I will define "distance education": (a) the majority of communication between teacher and student takes place non-contiguously, (b) it involves two-way communication (teacher-student) in order to facilitate and support the education process, and (c) technology is used to mediate this two-way communication (Garrison, 1992). This definition of distance education takes us a long way from the beginning of distance education, in 1878, with the Chataqua Movement.

I have briefly mentioned some of the benefits for the education provider and for business and industry. There are benefits derived from distance education for the learner: (a) greater access to different kinds of learning modalities, (b) learning can become fun, (c) a learning community can be established at the worksite, where learners can communicate with

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each other via e-mail and conferencing capabilities, and (d) learning becomes convenient.

While there are benefits that each of the parties involved can expect, certain things have to occur: (a) the needs of the adult learner come first (it should be remembered that technology is a means to an end), (b) independence (the learner must have the freedom to choose methods and objectives of learning), (c) power (the learner must be able to have the various abilities to deal successfully with the educational activity [and it is here that academic support services, such as counseling and testing becomes critical]), and (d) support (the physical and human resources should be available to the learner (Garrison 1992). All of this requires careful planning and input from all relevant parties. The quality of items "c" and "d" can be the difference between failure and success of a distance education program.

Distance Education and Support Services

Access to educational programming at a distance does not insure worthwhile educational outcomes. The adult student, learning at a distance, still requires appropriate feedback and guidance. The adult student's ability to decide to participate in distance learning activity does not necessarily translate into decision making ability and capability to seek out necessary and appropriate academic support services. Academic support services (e.g., counseling, academic and career testing) should be packaged along with the academic portion of the program. Academic support services should be included when the program is developed, rather than as an after-thought.

There may be reasons why the educational institution or the company may not provide adequate academic support services. Packaging academic support services may end up costing the education institution and the company money, employee time, and space. In some cases the education provider may be under time constraints (e.g., not getting a proposal to provide services in on time, or taking short-cuts in order to provide service by a specific date). Professional support staff may need training to use the technology, or training to communicate effectively via the technology (Granger, 1989). For instance, the support staff should be able to communicate results and information about results, and provide encouragement. This may require staff to enhance their communication and listening skills, in order to appropriately summarize relevant information and connect current and past conversations. I submit that these professional skills are more difficult to convey to the learner via technology, rather than in face to face communications, when time, distance, and mode of communication are not issues. The company may have to set aside additional time for employees to meet with support staff, and may have to set aside space for these meetings. There may also be some naivete on the part of the company's education liaison, who may not be familiar with reading or monitoring proposals, and may expect services that are not specified. Failure of one university-business collaboration, of which I am familiar, was a result of the support staff's technology phobia and reluctance to change, and the company's unwillingness to set aside a specific work area for support service meetings and materials.

It is clear that the available technology for educational programs has far outstripped the ability or, in some cases, the desire to provide necessary academic support services. It is my

belief, based on my experience, that potential problems can be alleviated by having relevant individuals, from academic support services, take part in the program planning process from conception.

Conclusions

I have attempted to present an argument for increasing the quality and quantity of academic support services as part of educational programming provided, to off-campus sites via technology. I have discussed adult participation, the expanding role of collaborative arrangements between education and business and industry, the advances in technology, and support services. Finally, I will discuss conclusions and some suggestions.

The expanded use of technology to provide educational programs is likely to continue, as we see advances made in telecommunications and computers. Technology has changed the educational landscape by centralizing information, allowing learners to access it from remote locations. Adults, however, are just as likely as traditional age learners to require academic support services (Manzo and Ross-Gordon, 1995). While there are studies that contend that learners involved in distance education do just as well academically as those students in face to face learning situations, the need for support services is just as well documented in these programs (Ehrmann, 1995; Kerka, 1995).

Suggestions

Academic support service staff should be part of the planning process from the beginning of program development. This will allow several things to occur: (a) support service staff can become familiar with the technology to be used, and any training deficiencies can be identified, (b) support service staff can have relevant input about what services could be provided to learners (e.g., career counseling and testing, academic testing, etc.), (c) support service staff can be used in formative (during the program, in order to make adjustments) and summative evaluation processes, and (d) support service staff can, if fully informed of program content and intent, alleviate fears of potential program participants. Academic support staff can give the learner an "honest" view of what might be achieved, based on the participant's abilities and skills. These professionals can also provide assistance to the learner dealing with life changes, by helping the learner frame problems, and use available education resources. Support staff can provide advice to planners about additional services that might be required by the learner.

In the long run, having academic support staff involved in the planning process can help programs be as good as the can be, advocate for the appropriate use of technology in the education process, and perhaps, help make marginal programs succeed.

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